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SUBJECT: SIERRA LEONE: ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

[¶1.](#) Summary: The four minor incidents of inter-religious violence over the past five years are the first such occurrences in Sierra Leone. As Christianity becomes less orthodox and Islam more so, such incidents are likely to recur or worsen, but Sierra Leoneans, both Muslim and Christian, are proud of their reputation for tolerance and will strive to maintain it. End Summary.

[¶2.](#) Sierra Leone has a history of religious intermingling and tolerance that is, or should be, the envy of most other countries with significant Muslim and Christian populations. Muslims form the larger group, perhaps 70 percent of the population, as is generally acknowledged by Christians. Many extended families contain both Muslim and Christian members, and conversion from not only Christianity to Islam but also Islam to Christianity (rare in other parts of the Muslim world) is common, with a wife (and children) invariably acquiring the religion of the husband/father. A Christian president was elected to succeed a Muslim president in 2007, in each case balanced by a vice-president of the other faith.

Religious symbolism is sufficiently politically important in Sierra Leone that the present Vice President Sam Sumana converted from Methodism to Islam, and went on the hajj, before the election. (Note: Inter-religious tolerance does not extend to traditional African religious beliefs. Both Christians and Muslims share an aversion to traditional African beliefs and practices which they dismiss as witchcraft or black magic. Openly admitted adherents of traditional religion appear to number less than one per cent of the population, but many beliefs and practices remain ingrained, especially in the up-country.)

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The Four Incidents  
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[¶3.](#) The four incidents of inter-religious violence 2005-09 (three of them occurring in the last year and a half) are therefore a source of discomfort and some anxiety for both Muslims and Christians. They are tame by comparison to events elsewhere (including at nearby N'zerekore in January), and Sierra Leoneans are quick -- perhaps a little too quick -- to dismiss their importance. In each case, Muslims were provoked by Christians and retaliated with violence to property. To review:

[¶A.](#) In May 2005 Muslim youths stoned an Anglican church and primary school in eastern (predominantly Muslim) Freetown after pupils from the school taunted a Muslim woman wearing a veil. The woman fell or was pulled down. (Note: The practice of wearing a veil remains unusual in Sierra Leone although head coverings are becoming a practice especially among women of the Fula tribe and are mandated for schoolgirls in Muslim schools.)

[¶B.](#) In September 2008, Muslims attacked a pentecostal church in eastern Freetown, when the loudspeakers at the church were turned up loud enough to drown out Ramadan prayers. Church members retaliated by breaking windows in a nearby mosque.

[¶C.](#) In April 2009, Muslims who claimed to be acting on the

orders of an imam burned down a pentecostal church in a village in Kambia district near the Guinea border. The church had recently been erected near where a mosque or Muslim prayer site had existed. The perpetrators came from outside the village.

¶D. Most recently, on December 15, 2009, Muslims attacked a pentecostal church during a Tuesday prayer service, damaging the pastor's Range Rover, the roof of the simple church structure, and the church's audio equipment. Members of the nearby mosque had repeatedly warned the pastor to reduce the volume of the loudspeakers.

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Muslim Views  
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¶4. Poloff called on a number of Muslim and Christian leaders February 11-15, starting with Shaykh Abu Bakr Conteh, a senior imam in Freetown center city and a member of the Inter-Religious Council. Conteh said that the Inter-Religious Council was formed in 1997 at the USIS office when a delegation came from the United States representing the World Council for Peace. Sierra Leone was in the midst of its internal war at the time, during which religion was not a significant factor, Conteh asserted; rather, the impetus to establish the Inter-Religious Council was mounting global concern about Muslim-Christian friction elsewhere and a desire to ensure that such friction would not spill over into Sierra Leone.

¶5. Conteh pointed out that Islam had been rooted in Sierra

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Leone for many centuries, as far back as the Kingdom of Mali in the fourteenth century. Much later, the Anglicans and Methodists had come by sea with the founding of Freetown in the late eighteenth century, Catholics following in the nineteenth century. These Christian groups had set up schools throughout the country, to the benefit of Muslims and Christians alike. Conteh, who speaks fluent Arabic and has spent many years in Saudi Arabia, said that he -- like most older Muslims -- had gained "95 percent" of his education from Christians, and indeed he had been brought up by a Christian woman. Conteh said that there was, in Sierra Leone, a thorough mutual understanding among Muslims and Christians of each other's practices and beliefs. He said that, on the one hand, it was lamentable that Islam in Sierra Leone was, as he put it, so "shallow," both in the sense of shallow-rootedness (Muslims too easily converted to Christianity), and in the sense of shallowness of understanding of Islamic doctrine and insufficient attention to Islamic practices. (Christianity, he claimed, was similarly "shallow" in Sierra Leone.)

¶6. On the other hand, Conteh said, for all the shallowness of their religious understanding and practice, Muslims and Christians in Sierra Leone had, through their age-old mutual accommodation and trust, demonstrated a "true interpretation" of the Koran and Bible. Formerly, there had been few "prayerful" people in Sierra Leone but "many God-fearing people." Now with the advent of greater "religious awareness," there were more and more prayerful people, but fewer God-fearing ones. Conteh viewed his life's work as, on the one hand, to show Sierra Leonean Muslims the way to a deeper, more correct Islam, while somehow striving to keep them tolerant.

¶7. Yet, he feared that the younger generation of Muslims and Christians was moving away from traditional Sierra Leonean tolerance. The recent minor incidents of inter-religious violence, he said, could become major without careful management. The 2009 Kambia incident (C above), he said, demonstrated the ill-effects of insensitive Christian evangelism. A charismatic female preacher had convinced local Muslims that she had raised an old man from the dead,

converted some of the villagers, raised money from the United States, and bought land on which the mission had built a church. Unfortunately, the land was the site of a dilapidated mosque which was still considered a holy Muslim place, outsiders got wind of what had happened, came to the village, burned down the church, and even poisoned the new water sources that the church had installed for the village. The Inter-Religious Council participated in a delegation, with government, UN, and embassies' representation, that helicoptered to the site immediately. (Note: Embassy employee who flew with this delegation reports that there was no "mosque" there at all, but only a open "prayer area" located at some distance from where the church was built, that it took three years for the church to be built, and that only after that did outsiders come to burn it down, instigated by an imam in Freetown.) Conteh said that the Inter-Religious Council intended soon to present a full report on the incident, with recommendations, to Vice President Sumana. One recommendation would be that holy sites of one religion, however "dilapidated," should never be used by another religion.

¶8. Conteh said that the first incident, involving the veiled woman (A above), was brought to an amicable solution for both sides, when it was understood that the woman (though taunted by children) had not been intentionally pushed down. Conteh noted that the hijab was mandated by the Koran. The state of morality among women in Sierra Leone, he said, was "lax" and the use of the hijab (both head covering and veil) would help to reduce that immorality.

¶9. Both of the other incidents (B and D), according to Conteh, derived from extreme insensitivity by new pentecostal churches to their largely Muslim surroundings in eastern Freetown. These churches frequently put on revivals and sometimes had prayer sessions every day of the week, using amplification systems at maximum loudness. In the most recent case (D above), the church had established itself within close proximity of a mosque. Conteh claimed that most of the stone-throwers were "not really Muslims" but "idle youths," and not members of the nearby mosque. This incident was brought immediately to the attention of the Vice President (who received the church's pastor within six days of the incident). The Inter-Religious Council intended to release a statement soon on the incident and step up its efforts on inter-religious sensitization. Otherwise, Conteh lamented, "a volcano awaits."

¶10. To poloff's questions about the doctrinal nature of Islam in Sierra Leone and the role of foreign Islamic donors, Conteh said that Sierra Leonean Islam was overwhelmingly

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Maliki Sunni, with little presence of Sufism or the Tidjani sect. The Ahmadiyya movement had arrived via Pakistan and the United Kingdom (and was given a further boost with the presence of Pakistani UN troops during the war) and was instrumental in establishing Muslim schools, which had previously hardly existed. There was some foreign money involved in the widespread, on-going construction effort -- the Kuwaitis in particular were supporting the construction of small new mosques. Qadhafi had financed entirely the construction of a large new mosque in eastern Freetown. However, Freetown still lacked a "Grand Mosque" typical of most capitals of Muslim countries. Ten years ago, Sierra Leonean Lebanese (who are overwhelmingly Shia), with help from Iran, had begun building a large mosque dominating the quay of central Freetown, but it remained unfinished, and while it was generally called the "Central Mosque," most Sierra Leoneans refused to consider it the "Grand Mosque," because it was Shi'a-inspired. (Note: According to press reports, at the beginning of February, the Iranian ambassador presided over a ceremony at this unfinished mosque, celebrating "The Islamic Revolution as a Continuation of the Prophet Mohamed's Mission." Head of the Ahmadiyya Mission in Sierra Leone Amir Saeed Ur Rahman, in his speech, noted that

"before the Revolution there was no Islamic tradition in Iran." Sunnis were represented at the occasion by the Secretary General of the United Council of Imams in Sierra Leone, al-Hajj Madani Kabba Kamara, who said that "imams in Sierra Leone have benefited a lot from the Iranians in terms of education and welfare.")

¶11. Conteh said that the Saudis had proposed three years ago to finance the construction of a Grand Mosque and had sent several delegations to Freetown for the purpose. The previous government (under a Muslim president) had appeared favorable. However, the present government (under a Christian president) had not yet authorized the project.

¶12. Subsequently, poloff sought separate appointments with the President and Spiritual Guide (or "Amir") of the United Council of Imams, al-Hajj Yahya al-Din Kamara and Abu Bakr Kamara, respectively. However, these worthies surprised poloff by receiving him jointly and in the presence of twenty other imams and staff. The occasion, replete with cameras and microphones, turned into a speech-giving event with little substance and prayers and recitations from the Koran. There were, however, a few interesting tidbits emerging from this otherwise controlled, formalistic, and tedious exercise. Speakers extolled Islam as a religion of peace (remarking on the core root of the word as meaning "peace," even if the word "Islam" itself means "submission") and praised Sierra Leone as an exemplar of inter-religious toleration. They noted the recent violence in neighboring N'zerekore and emphasized that such violence must be avoided in Sierra Leone. They regretted the "rise of Christian evangelism in the past 10-15 years" as having caused "some problems," which however remained "not serious." They noted that religious leaders, Muslim and Christian alike, had worked hard and worked together to resolve the war and avoid recriminations in its aftermath. Secretary General al-Hajj Madani Kabba Kamara said that Sierra Leoneans were "very proud" of their Central Mosque, that Sierra Leone had no "Grand Imam" as such but that the President and Amir of the United Council of Imams together "essentially filled that role," and that Sierra Leone soon "expected to have a Grand Mufti" (not further defined).

¶13. Finally, poloff called on Shaykh Fomba Abu Bakr Swaray, director of the radio station Voice of Islam and imam of a multi-story Islamic center located east of the city center. Shaykh Fomba, as he is known, is a well-known figure in Sierra Leone, through the radio station (the major Islamic one in the country). The station is heard as far away as Bo, Lunsar, and Kambia; most broadcasts are in the national language Krio, but it has some programs in Mende, Temne, Limba, Susu, Mandingo, Fula, Sherbro, and Loko.

¶14. When poloff mentioned that he had met some of Fomba's colleagues at the United Council of Imams, Fomba said that he was part of the Sierra Leone Muslim Missionary League and not the United Council of Imams. He intimated no fondness for the other group, saying the Missionary League was more scholarly, with deeper grounding in Islam and connections to Saudi Arabia, Libya, Kuwait, Sudan, and Nigeria. Fomba noted that Sierra Leone had been part of the Islamic world since the 1300's and he claimed that Islamic clerics in Sierra Leone had a long tradition of erudition. He said that, as Muslims were the great majority in Sierra Leone, the country's record of religious tolerance must be viewed as a Muslim accomplishment. However, the Christian minority needed, he said, to understand the limits of Muslim patience. Muslims should be able to enjoy the privilege, as well as carry the burden, of being the majority, and Christians needed to be more careful to accommodate themselves to the

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majority.

¶15. In regard to the "minor incidents" of the past several years, Fomba said that Muslims strongly objected to being

characterized as the violent party. In every case, Muslims had been sorely provoked. Although the case of the veiled woman (A above) was some years old now, Fomba said, it still rankled deeply among Muslims. According to Fomba, the Koran demanded that women wear a veil, and at least they must cover their hair. This poor woman was carrying food home to her husband, was walking by the Anglican church and school when a teacher came out of the school and yanked off her veil, causing her to fall to the ground, and the teacher prompted the children to taunt her as the "devil." (Note: Embassy employee went to the scene soon after it occurred and interviewed many people, who affirmed that a schoolteacher, who was directing traffic outside the school so that children would not be hit by cars, inadvertently struck the veiled woman with her outstretched hand.)

¶16. The more recent cases, Fomba noted, involved insupportable incitement from charismatic churches. The burning of the new Lord's Mission Church at a village in Kambia district (C above) was a result of the destruction of an existing mosque. Some Christians claimed that the mosque that was destroyed was derelict, but this was false. The mosque had continued to be actively used by inhabitants not only of that village but from surrounding villages. The claim by the female missionary that she had raised an old man from the dead was a source of anger throughout the district. Fomba hoped that the report now being finalized for presentation to the Vice President would call upon donors to provide funds for building a new mosque, a new church, and a new community center at the site of the destroyed mosque/burned church. (Note the very different Embassy on-the-ground account of this incident above.)

¶17. As for the most recent incident (D above), Fomba said that the new pentecostal church had been built very close to an existing mosque and it had insisted on very loud amplified services precisely at the time of evening Muslim prayers. The mosque had appealed to the church, to the community chief, and then to the police, and finally, in exasperation, the local police commander had himself gone into the church and yanked out the speaker cords. When the police commander was then attacked by the church members, Muslims outside became enraged and retaliated. (Note: The Mission of Hope Church claims that the police commander instigated the attack on the church.)

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Christian Views  
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¶18. On the Christian side, poloff first called on Pastor Ola Macauley of the Flaming Bible Church in Ascension Town (west of central Freetown), one of the larger, older, more established pentecostal churches. Macauley said that the Flaming Evangelical Mission had been founded 22 years ago by its leader, Bishop Abu Koroma, by origin a Temne Muslim from Magburaka, who had attended the same Christian boys' school as President Koroma. Abu Koroma was converted by his elder brother (who had been "saved," "born again," earlier) while attending Fourah Bay College. Macauley said that he himself was born a Methodist, his Krio father being Methodist; his mother had been a Krio Muslim. Macauley noted that it was "very common" in Sierra Leone for Muslims to convert to Christianity. Outdoor revivals were now an everyday happening in Freetown and throughout the country. The Flaming Evangelical Mission had large congregations in Freetown, Bo, and Kenema, and it was, he said, focusing its present crusades up-country.

¶19. Macauley said that the Sierra Leonean Christian population (30 percent of the total population, he agreed) was now approximately one-third pentecostal. The pentecostal movement was new; it had, he explained, started slowly in the 1980's and picked up momentum through the 1990's and the 2000's. The war in the 1990's was a stimulus, as the people had sought solace from all the brutality. Macauley estimated that 60 percent of the members of the Flaming Evangelical Mission had originally been "orthodox" Christian (Methodist,



Wesleyan, Anglican, or Catholic for the most part); 30 percent had been other pentecostal (i.e., moving into the Flaming church from other pentecostal churches); and 10 percent of Muslim origin. (The latter number, Macauley said, included practitioners of traditional African religion, who in Sierra Leone "invariably call themselves Muslims.")

¶20. Macauley said that his church saw no conflict with Islam. Radical Islam would, of course, pose a terrible problem -- as indeed would radical Christianity, Macauley said -- but Sierra Leone was not at that point yet, and

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hopefully not near it. In his view, the recent minor altercations were a product of Christian insensitivity. The December incident (D above) involved, he said, a radical pastor who openly condemned Islam, "and naturally the Muslims reacted." By contrast, the Flaming Bible Church, he said, never used outside loudspeakers except during revivals and then only after discussing the timing with neighboring mosques. He said his church did have prayer services on Friday as well as Wednesday (while some pentecostal churches now conducted prayer services every single day) but it scheduled those services around Muslim prayer times. Macauley noted that Muslims and Christians had always lived amicably together in Sierra Leone, the Muslim call to prayer being simply an accepted, natural part of the scene, and, in his view, there was no reason for conflict if people behaved with good sense and respect.

¶21. Poloff next called on Rev. Winston Ashcroft of the United Methodist Church, at a church located in central Freetown. Ashcroft said that the "intermarriage" of Christianity and Islam had been a feature of Freetown since its creation as a refuge for freed slaves. Freetown had originally had a Christian majority but Krio Muslims, from the first located especially in eastern Freetown, had been a significant presence from the beginning, with Muslims always coming into Freetown Peninsula from the east (the mainland). The phenomenon of conversion in both directions had also existed and been accepted from the beginning. Even Fula (Fulani, Peuhl), the strictest Muslims of Sierra Leone, converted to Christianity occasionally, and Ashcroft cited several examples.

¶22. Ashcroft acknowledged that traditional churches had gone through a period of significant loss of members, especially among the young, to the new, "charismatic" churches. (He preferred to avoid the term "evangelical" in referring to those churches, as he viewed his own church as being evangelical.) However, he believed that his church had stopped the trend by taking up some of the methods of the charismatic churches, while remaining faithful to its liturgy. The formerly "stiff-necked" church had now introduced two major "procedural" changes: in the music (decreasing the use of the organ in favor of amplified drums on keyboard) and in the style of sermon (the pastor leaving the pulpit and going down to energize the congregation). The church had also introduced a "praise time" of energetic singing and chanting and rhythm.

¶23. Ashcroft said that the United Methodist Church had not yet suffered any sort of violent incident involving Muslims. There had been threats to the church from Muslims, but, so far, these had been peacefully resolved. According to Ashcroft, "Christians have the philosophy of turn the cheek, which is nonexistent in Islam. In every case, the Christians have to compromise, while the Muslims are quick to threaten." There was no doubt, he said, that Muslims were becoming more self-aware and intolerant, but he remained "optimistic that Sierra Leone will avoid the rise of Islamic fundamentalism."

¶24. Subsequently, poloff called on Rev. Father Vincent Davies of Sacred Heart Cathedral in central Freetown. Davies said that Catholicism had come relatively late to Sierra Leone (in 1860) and the Catholic population amounted to only

about 10 percent of Christians (or three percent of the general population). However, he said, the mainly Irish missionaries had left a massive legacy behind: over forty percent of schools in Sierra Leone today were Catholic or at least had a Catholic origin, he said. Most of those schools had, and always had had, a majority of Muslim students. There had been no Catholic-Muslim incidents, and the Catholic Church had no cause for complaint in that quarter. It had, however, seen a palpable recent loss of members to the charismatics. Davies said that he was one of three priests whom the bishop had recently allowed to conduct "healing masses" with loud singing, shouting, dancing, and use of local instruments, as a way to stem the exodus.

¶25. Finally, poloff called on Rev. Usman Fornah, leader ("National Superintendent") of the Wesleyan Church of Sierra Leone, who is at present also the general secretary of the Inter-Religious Council. Fornah explained that, as his name suggests, he was born a Muslim (his parents are still Muslims), went to a Christian school, and was converted at the age of 19. He said that the Wesleyan Church, an American offshoot of the Methodist Church (disavowing episcopal usages, such as bishops and robes), founded its Sierra Leone branch in 1889. The Wesleyan Church was, he said, avowedly evangelical but not pentecostal or charismatic, the latter characterized especially by speaking tongues and claims of miracles, especially miraculous healing.

¶26. Fornah laid blame for the three most recent inter-religious incidents of violence on the charismatic

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churches. (He was not aware of the 2005 incident involving the veiled woman.) He said that some of the charismatic churches exemplified a disturbing trend of arrogance and insensitivity. This fringe took a particularly hostile attitude toward Muslims and was boosted by considerable external monetary support, especially from the United States.

For example, the Lord's Mission, which Fornah understood to have destroyed an existing if derelict mosque in Kambia district (C above) in order to erect a church, had received ample donations that had come pouring in from the United States when people there learned that the female missionary had, supposedly, raised an old man from the dead and had converted Muslims.

¶27. Fornah said that the Inter-Religious Council was doing the best it could to investigate these incidents but it had no resources, no staff, no vehicles -- he, for example, was serving as interim general secretary of the Inter-Religious Council while being head of the entire Wesleyan Church in Sierra Leone, two full jobs at least. He said that the Council would soon be making its recommendations to the Vice President on the Kambia incident, which would include:

-- Registration of all religious entities by the Ministry of Social Welfare (which has responsibility in the religious sector). (Fornah explained that the Council had no desire to limit religious freedom, but some of the charismatic groups had no evident structure or person in charge to hold responsible.)

-- Establishment of a basic code of conduct for all religious entities, to cover respect for prayer times and ending of religious slander on both Christian and Muslim radio stations. (Fornah said that both the charismatics' BBN -- Believers' Broadcasting Network -- and the Voice of Islam carried outrageous broadcasts casting aspersions on the other faith.)

-- Requiring a reasonable distance between new churches and existing mosques (and vice versa).

-- Establishment of a National Council for Prevention and Management of Religious Conflicts with representation of all concerned parties, replicated at district level. (Fornah

said that the problem would be funding, but he hoped that there would be donor interest. He also hoped that the key religious leaders, not politicians, would have the primary role).

-- Holding of a National Religious Conference to discuss openly all causes of religious tension and to find solutions. (Donor support would be needed.)

¶28. Fornah lamented that the Inter-Religious Council had at present no representative from the charismatic churches. There had been a charismatic participant when the Council was first established but not for some years. The charismatics appeared to dislike working with the main-line churches, did not like to compromise, and, in the more radical cases, refused to sit down with Muslims as being heathens.

¶29. Fornah said that he remained hopeful that Sierra Leone's tradition of tolerance would prevail in the near future. Over the longer term, the future appeared to be less positive. At present trends, the charismatics would become ever more radical, and the Muslims would be subject to ever greater external influence. Formerly, Muslim parents who wanted a good education for their children sent them to Christian schools, and many Muslim parents continued to do so. But Muslim education, like the use of the headscarf, was growing, and the web of interaction and points of contact between the two communities appeared slowly to be dwindling.

CHESHES